

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# What Is a “Case” in Postreform Wisconsin? Reconciling Caseload with Workload

*A White Paper Commissioned by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development*

Rebecca J. Swartz

Hudson Institute

2001

---

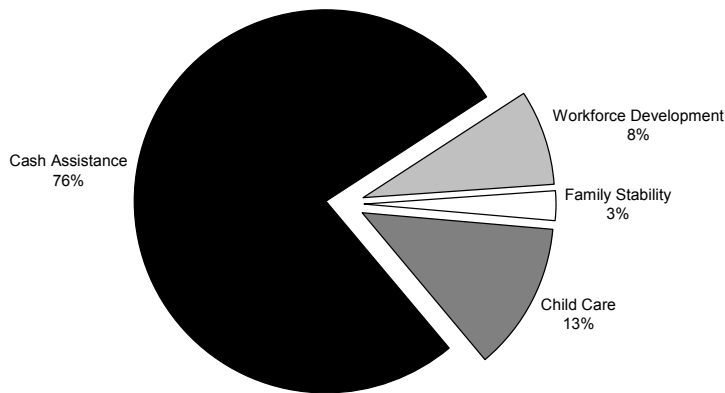
Over the past 10 years, Wisconsin has seen a dramatic drop in its official welfare caseload. In 1987, that caseload was almost 100,000. It is now around 6,500, a decline of 93 percent. Under the state’s major welfare reform program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), the caseload has fallen faster than anyone, including the most optimistic observers, expected. Or has it? Consider the following: In 1995, the total number of Wisconsin cases receiving cash assistance, child care, food stamps, Medicaid, assistance to care for a related or disabled child, or some form of case management services was approximately 118,595. In 2000, the number receiving at least one of those same services was 114,725, a drop of only 3 percent.

While the total number of families served has not changed, the types of assistance they receive have. By taking full advantage of the new authority granted to states through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) entitlement program, Wisconsin has shifted from an income support program to a work support program. As such, the current definition of caseload—anyone receiving a cash grant—is no longer adequate and can even be misleading. To understand these changes and their impact on the definition of caseload, consider the following four major policy shifts, which occurred with TANF implementation.

1. **Some participants have shifted to new programs.** Wisconsin created two new programs to serve children who formerly received “child-only” benefits under AFDC. Children who live with a non-legally responsible relative like an aunt or grandparent are served through the Kinship Care program; and children whose parents receive Supplemental Security Income are served through the SSI Caretaker Supplement program. Both of these programs provide cash assistance but do not have work requirements or time limits and are not generally considered in the state’s caseload figures.
2. **Some original services are extended to new groups of participants.** Whereas supportive services were once targeted to those on cash assistance, they are now targeted to working families. In fact, Wisconsin has dramatically expanded eligibility for two important supports—child care and Medicaid—to cover more working families. And as more and more families enter the workforce, their connection to employment assistance is often through their interactions with agencies about their food stamps, child care, and/or Medicaid benefits, creating an agency workload that is not usually captured even when supportive services case counts are considered in the total caseload.
3. **New services are provided to new participants.** Working families are now eligible for case management and a host of other services aimed at helping parents succeed and advance in the workforce. Many of these services, however, are provided through a series of disjointed programs having their own reporting requirements and caseload definitions. Although postemployment programs are growing in importance and in impact, the sum of clients served in these programs is not generally considered in the state’s caseload figures.
4. **The services offered to the original participant base have intensified and expanded.** Despite the rapid declines in the number of families receiving cash assistance, the workload involved in serving these families has not declined as rapidly. The explanation is simple: Wisconsin has changed the way agencies interact with cash participants. The new approach is called “full engagement” and it has two important ingredients: (1) working with the full cash caseload rather than exempting the least employable; and (2) “engaging” participants in individualized employability plans rather than providing an assembly-line approach to assistance. As a result of this new approach, agencies spend more time per participant and are branching into a wider range of activities to address the underlying issues preventing parents from succeeding in the workforce.

These four policy shifts are evident in the way Wisconsin spends its welfare funding. Whereas Wisconsin spent over two-thirds of its total funding on cash assistance in 1996, the state now spends just 16 percent on cash assistance and focuses the remainder on child care assistance and tax transfers as well as workforce development services and services aimed at increasing family stability. With so few people receiving cash benefits, policymakers can no longer use receipt of cash assistance as a proxy for measuring overall participation in government assistance programs.

**Wisconsin's Expenditures for 1996**  
**Total Spending = \$399,806,233**



Although the challenges are great, risks of staying with the status quo are also great. State policymakers anticipated that Wisconsin's primary program, W-2, would need to evolve to address new challenges as they emerged. Yet the evolution of this program and the state's workforce strategy in general can be successful only if key stakeholders support such changes. To support the changes, stakeholders need to understand them. As it stands today, Wisconsin's ability to tell its story is being limited by old terms and definitions that no longer apply to the new realities of service delivery. With a more accurate definition of caseload, DWD can tell the Wisconsin story to garner support for the next phase of welfare reform from the state legislature, congressional leaders, the media, and the general public.

In sum, a more accurate definition of caseload will serve four purposes:

- A better definition of caseload will ensure that the state's definitions match its goals.
- A better definition will help the state better evaluate the performance of Wisconsin's 72 W-2 agencies.
- A better definition of caseload will help the legislature assess the needs and accomplishments of the program when making funding decisions.
- During the TANF reauthorization debate that is just beginning, a better definition of caseload will help Wisconsin demonstrate to Congress that federal resources have been put to good use.

Yet creating a more complete definition of caseload that reflects agency workload is not an easy task. In creating a new definition, state policymakers will have to consider at least three things. First, low-income families are served through a series of individual programs governed by different rules and reporting requirements and operating somewhat independently of each other, making it difficult to collect unduplicated case counts. Second, some families currently being served are not captured in any case count because they receive periodic assistance on an ad hoc basis. Third, agencies have a range of workload issues that are not case-specific, such as working with employers, staff training requirements, navigating funding streams, marketing, public relations, and resource development.

**Wisconsin's Expenditures for 2000**  
**Total Spending = \$383,887,224**

